

“Give Yourself Permission to Stake Out the Territory of Your Writing Life.”

Tell us about your journey to becoming a published author.

The road to publishing my first short story was actually harder than publishing my novel. I began to write in 1998, when I was thirty-two, after I'd left my Silicon Valley career when my second child was born. I took classes and wrote a few short stories. After several years, I submitted one of these stories, “The Company of Men,” to San Francisco State’s annual short story contest, and it won first prize.

Armed with the award, I sent it to *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*. I never did get a reply from *The New Yorker*, but in short order I received a typed letter from C. Michael Curtis at *The Atlantic*. “You write with feeling,” he wrote. “But ‘The Company of Men’ is awfully



ruminative, and internalized. We’re not drawn to it, I’m sorry to say, but try us again.”

I went back to the story and revised for several months. Then my fourth child was born, and a full year passed before I sent it out again, this time to a list of more than two dozen literary journals. Mostly, I received the usual rejection slips. A half dozen journals sent me the “try us again” slip, and a handful sent personal notes. Some journals never replied at all. I was sending out several different stories by then, and I accumulated fifty or sixty rejections. I decided I would stop at one-hundred, then buckle down and write a novel.

Then, after having had the story for seven months, Carolyn Kuebler, the managing editor at *New England Review*, left a message on my cell phone saying she wanted to publish “The Company of Men.” I finally saw my work in print for the first time that November, six months after it had been accepted by *NER*, two years after I’d begun submitting it and a full five years from the time I put my first ideas for it down on paper.

Six months later, I got another phone call, this time from the editor of the 2007 O. Henry Prize Stories. “The Company of Men” had been selected as one of twenty stories published that year as an O. Henry Prize Winner.

By comparison, my debut novel, *A Small Indiscretion: A Novel*, was easy—not to write, but to sell. After 8 years of work, I finished it on a Monday in January, 2013. My agent sent it out to a dozen editors on Tuesday. The next day, it was sold to Random House. And last Tuesday, it made its way into the world.

What is a common misconception about being a writer?

I think people have this idea that writers are crazy artists with chaotic lives, but the opposite is often true.

To me, it’s not so different from running a busy household. The same ability to see the big picture is necessary, and the same determination to move diligently in a positive direction despite inevitable setbacks. Order must be made out of chaos, both in the novel and in a family. Children thrive when there is a certain amount of stability and predictability. And so, I think, does a creative spirit.

Is there a place, routine or ritual that you have when writing? Is there an environment that allows you to be the most creative?

I learned this trick from another local writer, Ellen Sussman. When I sit down to write, I set a timer for forty-five minutes and I begin writing immediately, even if I’m only describing the weather. I force myself to put words on the page until the timer goes off. By then, I’m inevitably deep into an idea, but I force myself to stop. I set the timer again for fifteen minutes and I step away from my desk and walk around the room, do some jumping jacks,

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Interview

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maybe make myself a cup of coffee. When the fifteen minutes is up, I make a check box on a log I keep – one unit complete – and I start the ritual all over again.

Something about giving the mind and body a few minutes away from the work triggers bigger, better thinking, and I always see something I might have missed. Once I've gone through three of these hour-long cycles, and made my three checks on my log, I give myself permission to be done for the day. I shoot for fifteen units a week, even if I have to take them on weekends or in the middle of the night when everybody in the family is asleep.

What were some of the struggles that you faced in the writing process? How were you able to overcome them?

I dabbled in writing before I became a mother, but it was only after the second of our four children was born that I began to write in earnest. The two preoccupations have always gone hand in hand, and in the beginning, I couldn't work it out: Was I meant to feel guilty when I was writing, or when I was not writing? When I was abandoning my children and shirking off my domestic duties or when I was tossing aside what might turn out to be my only talent?

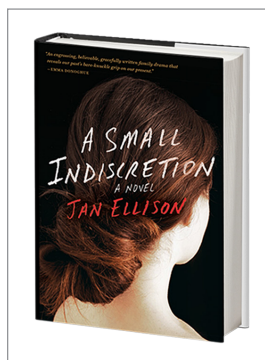
In the bulk of the hours and days of those early years, I was immersed in the physical act of mothering. The writing was a guilty retreat, the thing I'd slink off to furtively, greedily, as if to a lover. Two or three times a week for a few hours in a café. Or on a Saturday morning, while my husband watched four kids under the age of 8. When the novel was nearing completion, my mother swooped in again and again to take over my household while I fled to the mountains to finish it. Leaving my children to write has sometimes seemed a kind of madness over the years, but it would have been a different kind of madness not to write—one that might, in fact, have driven me crazy.

What is the most important piece of advice you can give to aspiring female authors?

You must give yourself permission to stake out the territory of your writing life. If you know you must write to stay sane, then you must demand the time and space to do it. Even before you ever publish anything. Even before you make a dime from writing. Even when nobody else believes in you. Even when you don't believe in yourself. It's not about belief; it's about compulsion. If you are compelled to write, then you must find a way to do it, or you will kill off the most essential part of yourself.

Tell us about your latest book, *A Small Indiscretion*.

A Small Indiscretion: A Novel is about an old obsession that hijacks a family's happiness. It unfolds the story of a harrowing coming-of-age, a marriage under siege, and a mother who must excavate the truth of her past. That sounds complicated, but it began with the simple notion of capturing the feeling of your life belonging to you for the first time.



When I was nineteen, I took a year off college. I spent three months in Paris,

then moved to London and checked into a youth hostel. On my birthday, I called my mother from an iconic red phone booth. This was before cell phones and the Internet, and when we'd hung up, I realized there was no way she nor anyone else could reach me. I found the idea intoxicating, and I leapt joyfully into my future. Two decades later, when I sat down to write what became *A Small Indiscretion*, it was simply that feeling I was trying to capture—the heady, lonely liberty of that moment in life when you can choose to become anyone at all. In the novel, that freedom ultimately has devastating consequences for the main character, Annie Black. I was luckier. •

A Small Indiscretion by Jan Ellison (Random House, \$27, 336 pages)



Jan Ellison lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband of twenty years and their four children. Jan's first published short story won a 2007 O. Henry Prize. Her work has also been short-listed for the Best American Short Stories and the Pushcart Prize. Jan had a brief

career in her twenties at a Silicon Valley startup, marketing risk management software to derivatives traders. The company went public, Jan became a mother, and instead of leaning in she leaned out, became a stay-at-home mom, and began to write.

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